

August 1, 1946

Tentative

Public Relations Procedures of the Extension Service, USDA,

On Controversial Subjects

by
Lester A. Schlup

-----o-----

Persons who are concerned with public relations are sometimes forced, like Mohammed's coffin, to float somewhere between heaven and earth. When problems become piping hot, administrators, information officers, and others who handle public relations need clear, cool judgment to retain sympathetic public understanding of their agency's program and objectives. This is especially true when the problem is a controversial one upon which public opinion has not fully crystallized. In such instances, various groups of the public may react in a critical and deeply emotional way either pro or con on the problem in controversy.

When this happens, it is most difficult to determine whether the application of a definite policy or a policy in the making is advancing beyond or lagging behind public opinion. Since public opinion on controversial policies varies in different sections of the country and among different groups of people, it is practically impossible to take a definite stand nationally which would be reflected uniformly everywhere.

This difficulty is realized by Federal agencies with completely centralized administrative control. However, it is even more pronounced with an organization like the Cooperative Extension Service, which operates autonomously and which has representatives in every local farming area who reflect to a great extent the thinking of the local people for whom and, in part, by whom, their jobs are maintained.

This autonomous feature of the Cooperative Extension Service is not a weakness of the organization. On the contrary, from the long-time point of view it reflects great strength in a democratic country where people have freedom of expression. It reflects strength because no policy, however desirable in principle, is worth its salt unless it is carried out. But it is not possible to carry out a policy unless it has the backing of people, particularly those people who are most intimately concerned. Policies grow and are carried out as people grow in understanding and tolerance and as they manifest sympathetic support and active cooperation.

In instances where a national policy is in controversy and conflicts with certain local attitudes, the only course for any Government agency to take is to determine how, when, and where some small progress can be made in reaching the goal. The kind of activity undertaken and its timing are extremely important and they should proceed in ways that will get full

voluntary support publicly. This may indeed be a very slow process. In an organization, such as the Cooperative Extension Service, it is the only substantially effective process, since it builds firmly and permanently.

Building slowly, although most effective in the end, is not very dramatic. It is a process with which some groups become extremely impatient. With the speed of modern communication media and with political susceptibility to pressure groups, such impatience can be manifested in very embarrassing ways. News wire services and radio can flash controversial items across the country. The practice of using simultaneously local sponsors in many towns and communities to further pressure-group activities is difficult to meet from a central point. Communications to Congressmen, pleas to the executive branch of the Government, and many other direct or subtle ways of propaganda can build a sizable pressure in places that count.

Now what can we, in the Federal office of the Cooperative Extension Service, do in a public relations way to meet such issues when they develop? As I see it, the following points might be suggestive of a course of action:

(1) Be Sincere and Factual.

Policies are static until they are accepted and adopted in local areas. Where there is a conflicting attitude among public leaders in various localities which is based upon long-standing, deep-seated traditions, little can be accomplished in a short period to pave the way for carrying out national policy through the process of education and dissemination of information. Changing public attitudes on subjects which people regard in a deeply emotional way is indeed a long-time process. On the other hand, favorable public utterances and statements from national governmental sources, even if desirable, do not help much unless they reflect positive action. They do not help greatly because leaders of any movement are trained to look for the substance behind public utterances and to watch for definite action. If any statements are made, they must obviously be sincere. A smoke screen is as easy to detect in a public relations program as in a military campaign. It is, therefore, evident that no truly effective public relations policy can be adopted unless it is based upon truth and facts, the substance of which is inherent in positive administrative planning and resultant action.

(2) Be Alert to Public Reactions.

We should be alert to detect the growing forces of public opinion on controversial issues and to appraise their probable impact upon our program and upon the authorized activities of the staff. Preparations should be made, as far in advance as possible, to formulate our position in relation to such controversial issues in order that suitable answers will be ready when the questions are asked. It would be wise to arm the staff, particularly the key members, with the basic reasoning upon which the position is based.

(3) Some Administrative Plans Helpful.

Specific administrative plans should be made which are compatible with the extent to which public opinion and the thinking of activity leaders have progressed. Such plans can be made public provided the way has been paved to put them into force. No commitments should be announced that cannot be carried through.

(4) Policy Belongs to the Institution.

Policies are arrived at through the democratic processes of discussion and reconciliation of conflicting points of view. They may or may not be set forth in legislation. Because policies are formulated democratically, no one staff member can authoritatively present the position of the U. S. Department of Agriculture or the Cooperative Extension Service on controversial issues. To avoid conflict and confusion, then, the individual should not attempt to present publicly, through interviews, talks, or in other ways, any position on such issues unless the proposed statement has been cleared by the proper policy officials. No institution can afford to be embarrassed by the personal opinions of its staff.

(5) Cautions on Interviews.

Most reporters are objective and seek to interpret the facts in an unbiased way. With such reporters misrepresentation of the facts is unintentional and frequently due to unclear statements given by the person interviewed. Such unintentional misrepresentation can be tactfully corrected. However, there will be times when reporters covering a controversial subject will intentionally distort interviews, make statements that misinterpret the facts, or present half-truths. Such reporters are simply carrying out the editorial policies of their employers who may be crusaders or pleaders for special causes. That editorial policy is fixed, cannot be changed by the reporter, and is not susceptible to reasoning on our part, no matter how objective and factual such reasoning may be. In view of this, any attempt at persuasion, any effort to convince this type of reporter that previously quoted statements were not accurate, any rebuttal whatsoever on our part, simply adds more fuel for more stories supporting the editorial policy of the paper or papers that he represents. No effort should be made to answer them directly or to try to convince them that they are following the wrong course.

(6) Official Information May Be Released.

Even on controversial subjects, there are many things that can be said publicly and officially. When an issue becomes highly focused in the public mind, it is helpful for the agency to release materials covering such aspects of the matter as can properly be disseminated. Such releases should not be designed as a diversionary tactic, but simply as a report to the public that certain segments of the problem are being handled.

NOV 19 1946

(7) Consult the Division of Extension Information.

There is no desire to restrict press representatives from interviewing any member of the staff of the Federal Extension Service. It should be remembered, however, that on controversial subjects discussions with the press may prove to be embarrassing to the Cooperative Extension Service, the U. S. Department of Agriculture, or the Federal Government. When interviews of this character are requested, they should be referred to or handled in cooperation with the Division of Extension Information. This Division will provide, after consultation with policy officials, such information as it is possible to release, or refer the inquirers to more authoritative sources. In view of that, it is desirable for staff members to consult with the Division of Extension Information when press representatives seek interviews.

-----o-----